

Sermon on Sunday 25 October 2020

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Readings: Leviticus 19. 1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22. 34-40

When I preached a couple of months ago from Matthew's Gospel, it was all about a quiz. That time it was Jesus asking the questions, and his disciples – well, Simon Peter in particular – in the hot seat guessing the answer.

This time it's Jesus on the buzzer, and an unnamed Teacher of the Law playing quizmaster. Your starter for 10: 'Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?'

Laws and rules; the bread and butter of Coronavirus life. New rules almost every day. Which ones apply to us? What are the exemptions? What are they trying to achieve? Do they make any sense? Are they there to annoy and frustrate us, or are they there to save us? And the big unspoken question – are we going to obey them? And what happens if we don't.

According to their ancient traditions, Jewish scholars identified 613 laws or commandments in their scriptures – that's our Old Testament. Of these, 248 are positive exhortations to do things, like 'Honour your Father and Mother', and the remaining 365 are negative rules or prohibitions; the 'Thou shalt not's'. Isn't it odd to think that for every day of the year, there is a different thing the Old Testament tells you not to do. We could go through a whole year breaking each law one day at a time. Wouldn't that make a great

New Year's resolution? No, maybe not, forget I said that.

This isn't really a quiz, of course. But maybe it's a different game show format. 'Israel's favourite Law' – vote now for your choice. I don't want to be too flippant about someone else's culture, but the scholars do tell us that this was a popular topic for debate in the synagogues and seminaries 2000 years ago. The Teacher of the Law is inviting Jesus to make his contribution to the debate.

613 commandments; which will Jesus choose?

Well, apparently, he finds it hard to make his final choice, because in the end he goes for two.

Love the Lord your God – and love your neighbour as you love yourself. The first commandment is from Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 5. The second – and you know this because you were all listening attentively in the Old Testament reading – is from Leviticus chapter 19.

There's nothing controversial in Jesus' choice. Actually, Jesus has gone for what you might call the safe option. Even linking these two commandments together is not original Jesus. The combination is found in many ancient Jewish sources outside the Christian tradition. If they'd invited the audience to vote, this pair of commandments would probably have come out well on top. If he was on 'Pointless', Jesus would have done very badly.

Love God and love your Neighbour. All other Law depends on this.

It is a misfortune for the Christian traditions that love and Law have often been understood as opposites, or as conflicting elements in our understanding of God's relationship with the human race.

The old Law certainly gets some bad press in parts of the New Testament.

Jesus is fiercely critical of those who use the Law as a tool to proclaim their own piety and virtue, and to condemn and put down others who can't live up to their standards.

But if you know Psalm 119 – you know, the one with 176 verses – you'll find a long and joyful celebration of life lived in obedience to God's teaching. The Psalmist does not see the Law as a burden. He sees the Law as God's gift, as a reward for His people's faithfulness.

Is there a middle way to walk between these conflicting viewpoints?

The Old Testament Law certainly cannot be a template for modern life. There is much that is simply irrelevant to our world. Some attitudes to women, slavery, colonialism, sexuality, freedom of speech and crime and punishment all need some very big trigger warnings. At best, you might say some of it was 'enlightened by the standards of its own times', but not by our times.

But, like the psalmist, I want to look on the bright side today. I have occasionally teased congregations with the threat of a bible study on Leviticus. There is some wonderful stuff in there.

Just in the chapter from which we heard the briefest of extracts today, you will find rules on 'gleaning'; the instruction at harvest time to leave a little of the corn in your fields and the grapes on your vines for the poor to gather.

Rules for paying your workers' wages in full and on time. And, yes, there was a Minimum Wage Law in Old Testament Israel.

Rules giving foreigners the same rights and respect that Israelites enjoy.

And before you reach the end of Leviticus you will find the rudiments of the laws for a welfare system, for the relief of the poor from their debts, for responsible and sustainable exploitation of arable land, and for proper provision for rest days and holidays for everyone.

A lot of that sounds rather topical, doesn't it? And it tells of a God whose love finds expression in his promise of a fair, fruitful, contented, inclusive world – which can be ours if we have the faith to follow his Laws, and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

And it tells me that the God of the Law and the God of Love are one and the same.

It can be so tempting to think of God's Law as a minefield. A dangerous pattern of hidden booby traps

laid around God's Kingdom, that we have to try and get through without putting a foot wrong and blowing ourselves up. A place we want to escape from, to reach the reward beyond it.

It's not like that. God's Law is a safe space, a place of peace and happiness. It offers us, as individuals and as a race, a life worthy of God's people in God's Kingdom. It is the reward. It shares a home with God's Love.

Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour as you love yourself. All the Law depends on this.

